

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 04698

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, FR
SUBJECT: ELECTIONS 1978: THE CENTRISTS

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SUMMART. IN HIS SPEECH ON THE RIGHT CHOICE FOR FRANCE
(PARIS 2850), PRESIDENT GISCARD D'ESTAING DIVIDED
FRANCE POLITICALLY INTO FOUR PARTS: GAULLIST, GISCAR-
DIAN, SOCIALIST AND COMMUNIST. THOSE PARTIES CONSTITU-
TING THE "CENTER" ARE IN EFFECT UNDER THE WING OF THE
GISCARDIANS. THE CENTRISTS ARE MADE UP OF TWO MAJOR
COMPONENTS -- THE CENTER FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRATS (CDS) AND

THE RADICAL SOCIALISTS -- AND A MISCELLANY OF SMALL PARTIES OR GROUPS -- THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY, THE MOVEMENT FOR FRENCH SOCIAL DEMOCRACY (MDSF), THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR INDEPENDENTS AND FARMERS (CNIP), THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS, ETC. EACH OF THESE PARTIES IN ITSELF REPRESENTS A POLITICAL HISTORY AND APPROACH DISTINCTIVE FROM ITS FELLOW PARTIES. THEY ARE LOOPED TOGETHER, HOWEVER, BECAUSE THEY SHARE CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS:

- THEY EACH REPRESENT A SMALL PART OF THE ELECTORATE BUT SEE THEMSELVES AS THE CRUCIAL ELEMENT FOR THE MAJORITY TO WIN THE MARCH ELECTIONS;
- THEY SUPPORT GISCARD AND HIS PROGRAM OF SOCIAL-DEMOCRATIC REFORM;
- THEY HAVE JOINED TO VARIOUS DEGREES WITH GISCARD'S REPUBLICAN PARTY TO FORM THE GISCARDIAN ALTERNATIVE TO THE GAULLISTS WITHIN THE PRESENT GOVERNING COALITION. END SUMMARY.

1. CONSTITUTING THE CENTER BETWEEN THE GAULLIST DOMINATED RIGHT AND THE MARXIST DOMINATED LEFT, THESE PARTIES HAVE DEFINED THEMSELVES BY THEIR OPPOSITION TO BOTH. THE TWO LARGEST PARTIES, THE CDS AND THE RADICALS, JOINED THE GOVERNMENT MAINLY IN RESPONSE TO GISCARD'S CALL FOR REFORM AND GOVERNMENT FROM THE CENTER. GISCARD'S

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INTENT TO BUILD A CENTER CONSTITUENCY AS THE BASIS FOR GOVERNMENT BY DEFINITION APPEALED TO THE CENTRISTS AND APPEARED TO OFFER THEM A MAJOR OPPORTUNITY FOR A ROLE IN THE GOVERNMENT. IN FACT, CENTRISTS HAVE PLAYED A DISPROPORTIONALLY LARGE ROLE IN TERMS OF NUMBER OF MINISTERS IN THE GOVERNMENT UNDER GISCARD. UNTIL NOW, HOWEVER, GISCARD'S PROMISED PROGRAM OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REFORM HAS REMAINED LARGELY UNFULFILLED, AND THE CENTRISTS HAVE WATCHED PART OF THEIR POPULAR SUPPORT DRIFT AWAY TO THE OPPOSITION SOCIALIST PARTY. WITHIN THE GOVERNING COALITION, THE EVOLUTION OF PRESIDENT GISCARD'S REPUBLICAN PARTY FROM A PARTY OF CONSERVATIVE NOTABLES INTO A PARTY IDENTIFIED WITH GISCARD AND HIS IDEAS OF DEMOCRATIC REFORM HAS ALSO ALLOWED IT TO INCREASE ITS APPEAL TO THE CENTRIST ELECTORATE. THUS THE CENTRISTS FIND THEMSELVES CAUGHT BETWEEN THE PR AND THE PS, BOTH OF WHICH HAVE A GREATER APPEAL IN THE COUNTRY.

2. ANOTHER PROBLEM FOR THE CENTRISTS IS THAT WHILE THEY HAVE LONG ESPOUSED A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY WHICH IS NOW COMING INTO VOGUE AS THE "GISCARDIAN ALTERNATIVE", THEY HAVE FAILED TO DEVELOP A

STRONG COHERENT PARTY OR GROUPING OF PARTIES. THE PERSONALITY OF DE GAULLE DURING THE 1960'S AND THE CONTINUED GAULLIST DOMINANCE IN THE PRESENT MAJORITY COALITION, COMBINED WITH THE CENTRIST LEADERSHIP'S HIGH PROPENSITY FOR INTERNAL SQUABBLING, HAS RESULTED IN A WEAK AND SPLINTERED CENTER. THE CENTRIST PARTIES ALLOWED THEMSELVES TO BECOME VEHICLES FOR INDIVIDUALS WHICH

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WITH LIMITED NATIONAL APPEAL. FOR A WHILE, THE CENTRISTS HAD HOPED THAT PRIME MINISTER BARRE WOULD ASSUME
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AT LEAST THE SYMBOLIC LEADERSHIP OF THEIR PARTIES, AND BARRE MADE SOME EFFORT TO IDENTIFY WITH THEM. BUT HE EVENTUALLY CHOSE AN ELECTORAL ROLE AS HEAD OF THE GOVERNMENT, WORKING TO THE GREATEST EXTENT POSSIBLE WITH CANDIDATES OF ALL THE POLITICAL PARTIES SUPPORTING HIS PROGRAM. THUS THE CENTRISTS ARE TODAY CLEARLY MINORITY PARTNERS IN THE COALITION WITH A REPUBLICAN PARTY ABLE TO CAPITALIZE ON GISCARD.

3. SMALL BUT NECESSARY: WHILE SUBORDINATE IN SIZE AND STRENGTH TO THE PR, THE CENTER PARTIES STILL CONSTITUTE A MAJOR ELEMENT IN THE GISCARDIAN STRATEGY. STATED IN OVER-SIMPLIFIED TERMS, THIS STRATEGY OFFERS THE VOTER THE WIDEST POSSIBLE CHOICE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PRESENT GOVERNING COALITION. THAT THE FRENCH VOTER WANTS GENUINE CHANGES OR REFORMS IN THE PRESENT ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SYSTEM IS ACKNOWLEDGED BY ALL OF THE PARTIES AND SUBSTANTIATED BY THE LEFT'S CONTINUING DOMINANCE IN ALL THE POLLS DESPITE ITS INTERNAL PROBLEMS. LOCATED TO THE LEFT OF THE PR, THE CENTRISTS OFFER PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO APPEAL TO VOTERS (SMIC AT 2,000, PS SMIC AT 2400, REDUCED RETIREMENT AGE) TEMPTED TO VOTE FOR THE SOCIALISTS BUT ILL AT EASE WITH THE PS' ALLIANCE WITH THE COMMUNISTS. IN OTHER AREAS, THE CENTRISTS HAVE ESTABLISHED POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS THROUGH WHICH THEY CAN OBTAIN SIGNIFICANT VOTER SUPPORT WHERE THE PR COULD NOT. IN THE MOST RECENT POLL, THE CENTRISTS (AS DEFINED IN THIS CABLE) OBTAINED APPROXIMATELY 7 PERCENT OF THE PROJECTED VOTE, COMPARED WITH 15 FOR THE PR AND 22 FOR THE RPR. THIS POSITION IN THE POLLS IS BASED MAINLY ON THE CDS AND RADICALS.

4. THE CDS (CENTRE DES DEMOCRATES SOCIAUX): THE LAR-
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GEST AND YOUNGER OF THE TWO MAIN PARTIES, THE CDS WAS FOUNDED AT RENNES IN MAY OF 1976. IT IS COMPOSED OF THE FORMER CENTRE DEMOCRATE AND CENTRE DEMOCRATIE ET PROGRES, LED RESPECTIVELY BY JEAN LECANUET AND JACQUES BARROT. THE CDS IS THE MAJOR REMAINING VESTIGE OF THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC TRADITION WHICH HAS HISTORICALLY

REJECTED SECULAR SOCIALISM, IS STRONGLY ANTI-COMMUNIST AND VISCERALLY ANTI-GAULLIST. AFTER SUPPORTING DE GAULLE'S RETURN TO END THE CHAOS OF THE FOURTH REPUBLIC, THE CDS' PREDECESSOR PARTIES MOVED INTO THE OPPOSITION IN 1962. IN THE OPPOSITION THROUGHOUT FOR MUCH OF THE FIFTH REPUBLIC, THE CDP REJOINED THE MAJORITY IN 1969 IN SUPPORT OF POMPIDOU. THE TWO PARTIES UNITED IN THEIR SUPPORT OF GISCARD IN 1974 AND UNIFIED IN 1976. SINCE 1974, WHILE SUPPORTING THE GOVERNMENT, THE CDS HAS TRIED TO MAINTAIN ITS SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC IDENTITY. THE PARTY IS CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH JEAN LECANUET, ITS PRESIDENT, WHO FORCED DE GAULLE INTO A RUNOFF IN 1965, BUT WHO IS NO LONGER CONSIDERED A CONTENDER FOR THE PRESIDENCY. THE CDS PLATFORM, "THE OTHER SOLUTION", PROPOSES MORE PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC REFORMS THAN DOES THE PROGRAM OF THE PR (IT APPROACHES THAT OF THE SOCIALISTS IN SOME AREAS), WHILE BEING MORE CONSERVATIVE THAN THE PR IN THOSE AREAS DEALING WITH SOCIAL MORES (ABORTION, DIVORCE). THE CDS ADVOCATES A STRONG PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM, EUROPEAN UNION, CLOSE COOPERATION WITH THE US IN THE ATLANTIC COMMUNITY, AND A SYSTEM OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY WHICH WOULD INCREASE ITS PRESENCE THERE.

5. THE RADICAL SOCIALISTS: THE RADICAL SOCIALIST PARTY OF JEAN-JACQUES SERVAN-SCHREIBER (JJSS) IS FRANCE'S OLDEST PARTY. IT DOMINATED FRENCH POLITICS FROM ITS FOUNDING IN 1901 TO THE COLLAPSE OF FRANCE IN 1940. EVEN INTO THE FOURTH REPUBLIC, THE PARTY RETAINED A LARGE MEASURE OF ITS PRE-WAR STRENGTH, HEADING TEN OF

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THE TWENTY-ONE GOVERNMENTS FORMED DURING THAT PERIOD. UNDER THE FIFTH REPUBLIC THE RADICALS HAVE DECLINED DRASTICALLY IN STRENGTH. ITS POPUL BASE HAS DECLINED AS THE POPULATION SHIFTED FROM RURAL TO URBAN. THE PARTY SPLIT IN 1972 OVER WHETHER OR NOT TO JOIN THE COMMON PROGRAM, THE LEFT RADICALS JOINED THE PS AND PCF AND THE FOLLOWERS OF JJSS REMAINING IN THE NON-MARXIST OPPOSITION. THE RADICALS JOINED THE GOVERNMENT MAINLY TO STRENGTHEN GISCARD. THEY PROPOSE A PROGRAM OF BROAD SOCIAL REFORM, DECENTRALIZATION, INCREASED SOCIAL BENEFITS, AND A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY UNION. TODAY, THE RADICALS ARE CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH THEIR LEADER JJSS WHO HAS TENDED TO VIEW THE PARTY AS A

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VEHICLE FOR HIS OWN PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS AS MUCH AS A
PARTY TO BE STRENGTHENED IN ITS OWN RIGHT. WHILE PER-
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SONALLY CLOSE TO GISCARD, JJSS HAS CHOSEN TO REMAN
OUTSIDE OF THE MAINSTREAM OF THE GOVERNING COALITION AND

IN OPPOSITION TO ITS DOMINANCE BY THE GAULLISTS. JJSS HAS LED THE EFFORT TO ESTABLISH A SECOND CLEARLY DEFINED GISCARDIAN FACTION WITHIN THE PRESENT GOVERNING COALLITION IN CONTRAST AND IN COMPETITION WITH THE GAULLISTS. THE RECENT CREATION OF THE UNION POUR LA DEMOCRATIE FRANCAISE (UDF) WAS AT LEAST PARTIALLY DUE TO HIS EFFORTS.

6. THE UDF -- THE UNION POUR LA DEMOCRATIE FRANCAISE REPRESENTS THE ELECTORAL COALITION OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY AND ITS CENTRIST ALLIES FOR THE MARCH ELECTIONS. THE UDF WAS FORMED TO SERVE TWO MAIN PURPOSES: FIRST, BY PRESENTING THEIR COMBINED LIST AS A SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC, GISCARDIAN ALTERNATIVE TO THE GAULLIST RPR CANDIDATES IN THE PRIMARIES, THE GISCARDIAN/CENTRISTS HOPE TO ATTRACT THE 2 OR 3 PERCENT OF THE VOTE PRESENTLY TENDING TOWARD THE SOCIALISTS, NECESSARY FOR THE PRESENT GOVERNING COALITION TO WIN THE ELECTIONS. SECOND, THE SINGLE LIST OF CANDIDATES PREVENTS COMPETITION BETWEEN THE PR AND CENTRISTS WHICH WOULD IN MOST CASES HAVE GIVEN THE PRIMARY VICTORY TO THE RPR CANDIDATE. ON THE SECOND BALLOT, THE GISCARDIAN/CENTRISTS BELIEVE THEIR CANDIDATES SHOULD DO BETTER THAN THE RPR AGAINST LEFT CANDIDATES.

7. THE CANDIDATES ON THE UDF LIST CAN BE BROKEN DOWN BY PARTY APPROXIMATELY AS FOLLOWS: 200 PR, 100 CDS, 55 RADICALS, 10 CNIP, 5 MSDF, 5 CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS, AND THE REMAINDER WITH NO CLEARLY DEFINED PARTY AFFILIATION. WHILE PRESENTLY ONLY THE NAME GIVEN TO A COMBINED LIST OF CANDIDATES FOR THE MARCH ELECTION, THE UDF, ACCORDING

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TO JJSS, HAS PRETENSIONS OF FORMING THE BASIS OF A LARGE GISCARDIAN PARLIAMENTARY GROUP AFTER MARCH. THE LATEST POLL SHOWS THE COMBINED CDS AND RADICALS WINNING 35 SEATS AND THE PR BETWEEN 58 AND 69. BUT THERE IS CONSIDERABLE DOUBT THAT THE UDF, LAUNCHED JUST A MONTH BEFORE THE ELECTIONS, WILL AMOUNT TO ANYTHING MORE THAN PREVIOUS EFFORTS TO COORDINATE AND UNIFY GISCARDIAN/CENTRIST FACTIONS. ONE MONTH IS PRECIOUS LITTLE TIME TO ESTABLISH AN IDENTITY FOR THE INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATES, ESTABLISH A NATIONAL IMAGE FOR THE UDF AND APPEAL TO AN ELECTORATE WHICH ALREADY HAS ITS HANDS FULL KEEPING THE MINI-PARTIES OF THE CENTER STRAIGHT.

8. CONCLUSION: THE "FUTURE" OF THE CENTRISTS LIES MAINLY IN THE HANDS OF OTHERS. GIVEN THE CONTINUED DOMINANCE OF THE FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE BY THE MAJOR PARTIES, THE CENTRISTS' OPTIONS ARE LIMITED. IF THE PRESENT GOV-

ERNING COALITION WINS IN MARCH, THE CENTRIST PARTIES
COULD PROVIDE A HOPE FOR GISCARD'S OPENING TO THE LEFT.
ALONG WITH THE PR, THE CENTRISTS WOULD HOPE TO TAKE
ADVANTAGE OF A REDUCED RPR PRESENCE IN THE NATIONAL
ASSEMBLY AND GIVE THE GOF A MORE MARKED CENTER-LEFT
IMAGE AND PROGRAM. IN SUCH A SCHEME, THEY WILL PROBABLY
TRY, WE BELIEVE UNSUCCESSFULLY, TO ENTICE MRG AND PS
DEFECTORS TO THE GOVERNMENT SIDE. A VICTORY BY THE LEFT
WOULD NOT SIGNIFICANTLY ALTER THE CENTRISTS' POSITION
IN THE IMMEDIATE POST-ELECTION PHASE. WHETHER THE
LEFT GOVERNMENT IS PS/PCF OR A PS MINORITY, THE CEN-
TRISTS WILL REMAIN TIED TO THE GISCARDIAN CAMP UNTIL
THEY SEE WHAT THE NEW SITUATION BRINGS.

9. THE CENTRISTS ARE FAIRLY CLEARLY LOCKED INTO THEIR
PRESENT "GISCARDIAN BUT DIFFERENT" IDENTITY. THE YOUNG
CENTRIST LEADERS ARE SEEKING A MEANS TO DEVELOP THEIR
DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST IDENTITY AS A POLITICAL BASE, BUT
FIND THEMSELVES IN STIFF COMPETITION WITH THE PR AND
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PS. THEY WILL UNDOUBTEDLY TRY TO EXPLOIT DISSATISFACTION
WITHIN THE PRESENT PS ELECTORATE RESULTING FROM EITHER
A LOSS IN MARCH OR TOO CLOSE AN AFFILIATION WITH THE
COMMUNISTS. THE FUTURE OF THE CENTRISTS, HOWEVER, WILL
DEPEND TO AS GREAT A DEGREE ON THE SUCCESSES OR FAILURES
OF THE MAJOR PARTIES AS ON THEIR OWN EFFORTS.
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